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(54) Solution-phase site-specific preparation of GRF-PEG conjugates

(57) A method is described for the site-specific preparation of hGRF-PEG conjugates containing one or more PEG units (per mole of hGRF) covalently bound to Lys^{12} and/or Lys^{21} and/or N^{α}, characterized in that the conjugation reaction between the hGRF peptide and activated PEG is carried out in solution and the desired hGRF-PEG conjugate can be purified by chromatography.

The conjugates prepared by this method, as well as their use in the treatment and/or diagnosis of growth hormone deficiency, are also an object of the present invention.

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Description

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0001] The present invention relates to a method for the site-specific preparation of hGRF-PEG conjugates containing one or more than one PEG units (per hGRF) covalently bound to Lys^{12} and/or Lys^{21} and/or N^{α}, characterized in that the conjugation reaction between the hGRF peptide and activated PEG is carried out in solution and the desired hGRF-PEG conjugate is purified by chromatographic methods.

[0002] The conjugates prepared by this method, as well as their use in the treatment and/or diagnosis of growth-hormone related disorders, are also an object of the present invention.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0003] In the early 1980's several groups isolated and characterized growth hormone releasing factor (GRF).

[0004] GRF (also called Somatorelin) is a peptide secreted by the hypothalamus which acts on its receptor and can promote the release of growth hormone (GH) from the anterior pituitary. It exists as 44-, 40-, or 37-amino acid peptide; the 44-amino acids form may be converted physiologically into shorter forms. All three forms are reported to be active, the activity residing mainly in the first 29 amino acid residues. A synthetic peptide corresponding to the 1-29 amino acid sequence of human GRF [hGRF(1-29)], also called Sermorelin, has been prepared by recombinant DNA technology as described in European Patent EP 105 759.

[0005] Sermorelin has been used in the form of acetate for the diagnosis and treatment of growth hormone deficiency.

[0006] GRF has indeed a therapeutic value for the treatment of certain growth-hormone related disorders. The use of GRF to stimulate the release of GH is a physiological method in promoting long bone growth or protein anabolism.

[0007] One problem associated with the use of GRF relates to its short biological half-life (about 12 to 30 minutes). The hGRF(1-29)-NH_2 is subject to enzymatic degradation and is rapidly degraded in the plasma *via* dipeptidylpeptidase IV (DPP-IV) cleavage between residues Ala^2 and Asp^3.

[0008] It is therefore advantageous to develop biologically stable, long-acting GRF analogues using specific chemical modification of GRF, in order to prevent or slow down enzymatic degradation.

[0009] Polyethylene glycol (PEG) is a hydrophilic, biocompatible and non-toxic polymer of general formula $H(OCH_2CH_2)_nOH$, wherein $n \geq 4$. Its molecular weight could vary from 200 to 20,000 daltons.

[0010] It has been demonstrated that the chemical conjugation of PEG in its mono-methoxylated form to proteins and/or peptides significantly increases their duration of biological action. Like carbohydrate moieties in a glycoprotein, PEG provides a protective coating and increases the size of the molecule, thus reducing its metabolic degradation and its renal clearance rate.

[0011] PEG conjugation is an already established methodology for peptide and protein delivery pioneered by the fundamental studies of Davis and Abuchowski (Abuchowski et al., 1977a and 1977b). PEG conjugation to peptides or proteins generally resulted in non-specific chemical attachment of PEG to more than one amino acid residue. One of the key issues with this technology is therefore finding appropriate chemical methods to covalently conjugate PEG molecule(s) to specific amino acid residues.

[0012] For example, the trichlorotriazine-activated PEG, which was found to be toxic and reacted in a non-specific way, was later on replaced by various PEG reagents with chemical linkers that could react specifically to amino groups (Benchamp et al., 1983; Veronese et al., 1985; Zalipsky et al., 1983; Zalipski et al., 1990; and Delgado et al., 1990), to sulphydryl groups (Sartore et al., 1991; and Morpurgo et al., 1996) or to guanidino residues (Pande et al., 1980).

[0013] Various PEG-protein conjugates were found to be protected from proteolysis and/or to have a reduced immunogenicity (Monfardini et al., 1995; and Yamsuki et al., 1988).

[0014] Another technical difficulty in protein pegylation arised from the fact that PEG-protein conjugates usually have various number of PEG molecules attached and result in a mixture of conjugates with different PEG:protein stoichiometries. Site-specific pegylation remains a chemical challenge. The conjugation of PEG to GH represents a typical example of such problem (Clark et al., 1996). It was demonstrated that Lys-residues of GH were pegylated at random positions.

[0015] To avoid or reduce the loss of enzyme activity, the active site could be protected in advance, thus allowing enzyme pegylation to occur at non-active site(s) (Caliceti et al., 1993).

[0016] Another approach was recently proposed for the site-specific conjugation of PEG to low molecular weight peptides, such as GRF, which was prepared by solid-phase peptide synthesis. In these conjugates a pegylated amino acid, prepared in advance, was introduced into the peptide sequence during the solid-phase synthesis. This procedure, however, dramatically complicates product purification that is known to be the critical step in solid phase synthesis. The presence of PEG, for its high molecular weight and its polydispersivity, is likely to yield final products with unacceptable impurities and/or products with missing amino acids, the latter being considered to occur commonly in the Merrifield

procedure.

[0017] Mono-pegylation, meaning that only one PEG molecule is attached, using solid-phase synthesis to specific amino acid residues of [Ala^{15}]-hGRF(1-29)-NH_2 has been recently reported in the literature (Felix et al., 1995). This study shows that [Ala^{15}]-hGRF(1-29)-NH_2 pegylated at residues 21 or 25 retains the full *in-vitro* potency of the parent [Ala^{15}]-hGRF(1-29)-NH_2. There is however no *in-vivo* data to show whether these pegylated conjugates exhibit a longer duration of action with respect to the non-pegylated counterpart.

[0018] More recently, it has been demonstrated (Campbell et al., 1997) that the attachment of PEG with different molecular weights to the C-terminus of several analogs of hGRF, again using solid-phase synthesis, had enhanced duration of action in both pig and mouse models as compared to the non-pegylated counterpart.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0019] In contrast to the solid-phase preparation of mono-pegylated hGRF mentioned above, the present invention relates to site-specific pegylation of hGRF in solution phase.

[0020] hGRF was found to have a low solubility in a neutral/alkaline buffer solution, a chemical condition whereby most efficient pegylation reaction occurs. In a diluted hGRF solution, the hydrolysis of the activated PEG (such as the PEG ester) tends to decrease the yield of the pegylation reaction.

[0021] It was discovered by the Applicant that, in a suitable solvent whereby hGRF has a high solubility, it is possible to carry out a site-specific pegylation reaction in solution phase. In this way, even if the starting hGRF peptide is non-protected, the PEG chains will bind with high yields and almost exclusively to the primary amino groups (ε-amino groups) of Lys^{12}, Lys^{21} and/or N^{α}, depending upon the reaction conditions. The following four conjugates, which are also covered by the present invention, were obtained, the hGRF:PEG stoichiometric ratio in the conjugates mainly depending on the molar ratio of PEG to hGRF:

hGRF-PEG conjugate, in which 1 PEG molecule is covalently bound to Lys^{12},
hGRF-PEG conjugate, in which 1 PEG molecule is covalently bound to Lys^{21},
hGRF-2PEG conjugate, in which 2 PEG molecules are covalently bound to both Lys^{12} and Lys^{21}; and hGRF-3PEG conjugate, in which 3 PEG molecules are covalently bound to both Lys^{12} and Lys^{21} and also to N^{α}.

[0022] "N^{α}" through out the present invention means the amino group at the N-terminal position of the peptide (Tyr).

[0023] Further to this step, it is possible to carry out a simple chromatographic fractionation of the conjugates obtained in the reaction either by gel filtration or by direct application to a C18 HPLC column eluted by water/acetonitrile gradient. The second method is preferred, since large scale preparation and purification of the products could be obtained.

[0024] Therefore, the main embodiment of the present invention is a method for the site-specific preparation of different hGRF-PEG conjugates containing one or more than one PEG units (per hGRF) covalently bound to Lys^{12} and/or Lys^{21} and/or N^{α}, characterized in that the pegylation reaction is carried out in solution and the desired hGRF-PEG conjugate is purified, for example, by chromatographic methods.

[0025] A hGRF-PEG conjugate containing one or more PEG units (per mole of GRF) covalently bound to Lys^{12} and/or Lys^{21} and/or N^{α} is also covered by the present invention.

[0026] According to another embodiment of the present invention, if one or more of these three amino groups to which PEG chains bind, are reversibly protected by certain chemical groups from pegylation, the pegylation reaction will give directly the desired conjugate with specific pegylation sites, which can then be isolated from the reaction mixture, for example, by ultrafiltration or other chromatographic methods. In this case, the preparation method can further, optionally, comprise a de-protection reaction.

[0027] The de-protection reaction is preferably carried out according to known methods and depending on the chemical protective group to be removed.

[0028] According to this invention the term "hGRF", unless otherwise specified, is intended to cover any human GRF peptides, with particular reference to the 1-44, 1-40, 1-29 peptides and the corresponding amides thereof (containing an amide group at the N-terminus or C-terminus). The preferred hGRF peptide is hGRF(1-29)-NH_2.

[0029] The "activated PEG" can be an alkylating reagent, such as PEG aldehyde, PEG epoxide or PEG tresylate, or it can be an acylating reagent, such as PEG succinimidyl ester.

[0030] The activated PEG is used in its mono-methoxylated form. It has preferably a molecular weight between 2,000 and 20,000. $PEG_{5,000}$ is particularly preferred.

[0031] If activated PEG is an acylating agent, it preferably contains either a norleucine or ornithine residue bound to the PEG moiety *via* an amide linkage. These residues allow a precise determination of the linked PEG units per mole of peptide (see for example Sartore et al., 1991).

[0032] "Chromatographic methods" means any technique that is used to separate the components of a mixture by

their application on a support (stationary phase) through which a solvent (mobile phase) flows. The separation principles of the chromatography are based on the different physical nature of stationary and mobile phase.

[0033] Some particular types of chromatographic methods, which are well-known in the literature, include: liquid, high pressure liquid, ion exchange, absorption, affinity, partition, hydrophobic, reversed phase, gel filtration, ultrafiltration or thin-layer chromatography.

[0034] The molar ratio PEG:hGRF can be 1:1, 2:1 or 3:1, depending on which conjugate is sought at high yields.

[0035] The solvent of the pegylation reaction is selected from the group consisting of a highly concentrated nicotinamide aqueous solution, a buffered aqueous solution of a defolding agent (such as urea) or a polar organic solvent selected among dimethyl sulfoxide, dimethyl formamide/buffer or acetonitrile/buffer.

[0036] The pH of the solution is usually kept between 7 and 9.

[0037] A non-limitative list of protective chemical groups for Lys^{12} and Lys^{21} includes: Alloc (allyloxycarbonyl), Dde (1-(4,4-Dimethyl-2,6-dioxocyclohex-1-ylidene)ethyl), Adpoc (1-(1'-Adamantyl)-1-methyl-ethoxycarbonyl) or 2-Cl-Z (2-Chlorobenzyloxycarbonyl). Alloc is the preferred protective group for the lysine group.

[0038] Alloc can be removed according to one of the methods described in Greene T.W. et al., 1991). Dde can be removed with 2% hydrazine in DMF (see W.C. Chan et al., 1995). Adpoc can be removed similarly to Alloc (see also Dick F. et al., 1997). 2-Cl-Z can be requires a stronger acid deprotection (HF, TFMSA, HBr) or hydrogenation (see also Tam et al., 1987).

[0039] The protective groups for N^{α} can be an alkyl group, such as methyl, ethyl, propyl, isopropyl, butyl, t-butyl, benzyl or cyclohexyl. Isopropyl is the preferred one. These alkyl groups can be introduced by reductive alkylation (see Murphy et al, 1988 or Hocart et al., 1987).

[0040] [N^{α}-isopropyl-Tyr^{1},$Lys(Alloc)^{12}$]-hGRF and [$Lys(Alloc)^{12,21}$]-hGRF are also covered by the present invention, as useful and new intermediates of the pegylation reaction.

[0041] It has also been discovered that the pegylation:

1. does not modify the conformation of the peptide,
2. increases the resistance to the proteolytic degradation,
3. does not affect, or only slightly decreases, the biological activity, depending upon the extent of pegylation and
4. allows to obtain products (the conjugates), which are more soluble in aqueous buffered solutions.

[0042] Another object of the present invention is to provide the hGRF-PEG conjugates in substantially purified form in order for them to be suitable for use in pharmaceutical compositions, as active ingredient for the treatment of growth hormone-related disorders.

[0043] Further embodiments and advantages of the invention will be evident in the following description.

[0044] An embodiment of the invention is the administration of a pharmacologically active amount of the conjugates of the invention to subjects at risk of developing a growth hormone-related disease or to subjects already showing such pathology.

[0045] Any route of administration compatible with the active principle can be used. The preferred is the parenteral administration, such as subcutaneous, intramuscular or intravenous injection. The dose of the active ingredient to be administered depends on the basis of the medical prescriptions according to age, weight and the individual response of the patient.

[0046] The dosage can be between 5 and 6,000 mcg/Kg body weight and the preferable dose is between 10 and 300 mcg/Kg body weight.

[0047] The pharmaceutical composition for parenteral administration can be prepared in an injectable form comprising the active principle and a suitable vehicle. Vehicles for the parenteral administration are well known in the art and comprise, for example, water, saline solution, Ringer solution and/or dextrose.

[0048] The vehicle can contain small amounts of excipients in order to maintain the stability and isotonicity of the pharmaceutical preparation.

[0049] The preparation of the cited solutions can be carried out according to the ordinary modalities and preferably the conjugate content will be comprised between 0.5 mg/ml and 20 mg/ml.

[0050] In order to test the activity of the conjugate of the present invention, the CHO-hGRFR-LUC *in vitro* assay or a cell-based reporter gene assay can be used. The reporter gene assay has also been established by the Applicant and represents a further object of the present invention. This assay is also suitable for application in high throughput screening of hGRF agonists or mimetics. It will be described in detail in Example 7.

[0051] The present invention has been described with reference to the specific embodiments, but the content of the description comprises all modifications and substitutions which can be brought by a person skilled in the art without extending beyond the meaning and purpose of the claims.

[0052] The invention will now be described by means of the following Examples, which should not be construed as in any way limiting the present invention. The Examples will refer to the Figures specified here below.

DESCRIPTION OF THE FIGURES

[0053]

Figure 1 shows the amino acid sequence of hGRF(1-29)-NH_2. Arrows indicate the possible site(s) of pegylation.
Figure 2 shows the reversed-phase HPLC chromatography of the mixture obtained after the pegylation reaction in DMSO carried out as described in Example 1. The first two major peaks are the conjugates containing 1 PEG chain per mole of hGRF. The following minor peak is the conjugate hGRF:2PEG and the last minor peak the conjugate GRF:3PEG.
Figure 3a reports the degradation of hGRF(1-29) and of the PEG conjugates of the present invention by subtilisin.
Figure 3b reports the degradation of hGRF(1-29) and of the PEG conjugates of the present invention by chymotrypsin.
Figure 4 shows the spectroscopic characterization of [Lys($PEG_{5,000}$ -CH_2-O-CO-Nle-CO)^{12,21}-hGRF(1-29)-NH_2] carried out by circular dichroism. The spectra are superimposable with those of "native" hGRF.
Figure 5 shows the biological effect of various hGRF-PEG conjugates (from a 1st DMSO preparation) in the CHO-hGRFR-LUC *in vitro* assay. Data represent the average of three independent experiments.
Figure 6 reports the biological effect of various hGRF-PEG conjugates (from a 2nd DMSO preparation) in the CHO-hGRFR-LUC *in vitro*, assay. Data represent the average of two independent experiments.
Figure 7 shows the biological effect of various hGRF-PEG conjugates (from a nicotinamide preparation) in the CHO-hGRFR-LUC *in vitro* assay. Data represent the average of two independent experiments.
Figure 8 illustrates the biological effect of various hGRF-PEG conjugates (1st DMSO preparation) on the GH release from rat pituitary cell *in vitro.*
Figure 9 shows the biological effect of various hGRF-PEG conjugates (from a 2nd DMSO preparation) on the GH release from rat pituitary cell *in vitro.*
Figure 10 shows the time-response curve of plasma hGRF and serum GH levels following hGRF (400 μg/rat) i v. injection in male rats. Each point represents the mean ± SEM value obtained from nine rats.
Figure 11A (see the first graph on the page) shows the time-response curve of serum GH levels after the i v. injection of 400 mg/rat of hGRF-PEG conjugates (DMSO preparation) in male rats. Each point represents the mean value obtained for three rats.
Figure 11B (see the second graph on the page) shows the time-response curve of plasma GRF levels after the i.v. injection of 400 mg/rat of hGRF-PEG conjugates (DMSO preparation) in male rats. Each point represents the mean value obtained for three rats.
Figure 12 represents the restriction map of plasmid pcDNA3-GRF-R used in the reporter gene assay for the evaluation of GRF activity.
Figure 13 shows the restriction map of plasmid pTF5-53 LUC used in the reporter gene assay for the evaluation of GRF activity.

EXAMPLES

Abbreviations

Acetonitrile (ACN), allyloxycarbonyl (Alloc), Benzyl (BZL), tert-Butyloxycarbonyl (Boc), Dichloromethane (DCM), Diisopropylethylamine (DIEA), Dimethyl Formamide (DMF), dimethyl sulphoxide (DMSO), 9-Fluorenylmethyloxycarbonyl (FMOC), 2-[1H-Benzotriazole-1-yl]-1,1,3,3-tetramethyluronium hexafluorophosphate (HBTU), 1-hydroxybenzotriazole (HOBt,), methyl-t-butyl ether (MTBE), norleucine (Nle), N-methyl pyrrolidone (NMP), 2,2,5,7,8-Pentamethyl-chroman-6-sulfonyl (Pmc), tert-Butyl (tBu), Trifluoroacetic Acid (TFA), Triphenylmethyl (Trt).

EXAMPLE 1: Solution-phase pegylation of hGRF

[0054] In these experiments mono-methoxylated $PEG_{5,000}$ bearing norleucine (Nle) as a spacer between polymer and peptide, activated at the carboxy group as the succinimidyl ester, was used as pegylating reagent. It can be prepared for example as described in Lu et al., 1994.
[0055] Human GRF_{1-29} hGRF(1-29)-NH_2 supplied by Bachem was used as hGRF peptide.
[0056] Given the low solubility of hGRF(1-29) in water solution at neutral or slightly alkaline pH needed for the pegylation, alternative reaction conditions A to E have been adopted:

A. Dimethyl sulphoxide: 20 mg of peptide were dissolved in 1 ml DMSO and proper amounts of pegylating reagent were added at once.

B. Dimethyl formamide/0.2 M borate buffer pH 8.0 in a volume ratio of 1:1: peptide and proper amounts pegylating reagent were added at once.

C. Highly concentrated nicotinamide aqueous solution (200 mg/ml): 200 mg of nicotinamide were added to a solution of 40 mg of hGRF(1-29) in 1 ml of 10 mM acetic acid. 1 ml of 0.2 M borate buffer at pH 8.0 was added to the acidic solution to reach the desired pH, before the addition of proper amounts of pegylating reagent.

D. Acetonitrile /0.2 M borate buffer pH 8.0 in a volume ratio of 1:1 and proper amounts of pegylating reagent were added at once.

E. 0.2 M borate buffer , 5 M urea, pH 8.0 and proper amounts of pegylating reagent were added at once.

[0057] The dry PEG reagent was added under stirring to reach final PEG:hGRF molar ratios of 1:1, 2:1 or 3:1. A 2:1 ratio is the preferred one.

[0058] The use of different PEG:hGRF molar ratios allowed the preparation of a reaction mixture with a predominant conjugate being the desired conjugate.

[0059] The reaction solution was left standing for 5 hours at room temperature before purification.

[0060] The following 4 hGRF-PEG conjugates (A1-A4) are obtained:

A1: [Lys($PEG_{5,000}$-CH_2-O-CO-Nle-CO)^{12}-hGRF(1-29)-NH_2],
A2: [Lys($PEG_{5,000}$-CH_2-O-CO-Nle-CO)^{21}-hGRF(1-29)-NH_2],
A3: [Lys($PEG_{5,000}$-CH_2-O-CO-Nle-CO)^{12,21}-hGRF(1-29)-NH_2] and
A4: N^{α}-($PEG_{5,000}$-CH_2-O-CO-Nle-CO)[Lys($PEG_{5,000}$-CH_2-O-CO-Nle-CO)^{12,21}-hGRF(1-29)-NH_2].

[0061] The excess of DMSO, dimethyl formamide, acetonitrile or urea and the side-product of reaction (hydroxysuccinimide) were removed by gel ultrafiltration using a 1,000 D cut-off membrane. The volume was brought to 10 ml with 10 mM acetic acid and then reduced to 1 ml. The procedure was repeated three times.

[0062] The hGRF-PEG conjugates were isolated by gel filtration chromatography or alternatively by reversed-phase chromatography.

EXAMPLE 2: Gel Filtration Chromatography

[0063] By gel filtration chromatography the products were fractionated on the basis of the different molecular weight of the components (in this case, conjugates hGRF-PEG 1:1 MW=8,358, hGRF-PEG 1:2 MW= 13,358, and hGRF-PEG 1:3 MW = 18,358. Unconjugated hGRF MW = 3358). The separation was performed by using a serial column system Superdex 75-Superose 12 resin (Biotech, Pharmacia) eluted with 10 ml acetic acid at a flow rate of 1.5ml/min.

[0064] The collected fractions of 1 ml were analysed by OD at 280 nm for protein content and by iodine test for PEG content (Sims et al., 1980).

[0065] After pegylation in DMSO using a hGRF:PEG molar ratio of 1:1, three peaks were obtained:

a hGRF-PEG conjugate at an elution volume of 132 ml (major peak);
a hGRF-PEG conjugate at an elution volume of 108 ml (minor peak); and
unconjugated hGRF at an elution volume of 108 ml (minor peak).

[0066] After pegylation in DMSO using a hGRF:PEG molar ratio of 1:2, three peaks were obtained:

a hGRF-PEG conjugate at an elution volume of 108 ml (major peak);
a hGRF-PEG conjugate at an elution volume of 132 ml (minor peak); and
a hGRF-PEG conjugate at an elution volume of 73 ml (minor peak).

[0067] After pegylation in DMSO using a hGRF:PEG molar ratio of 1:3, two peaks were obtained:

a hGRF-PEG conjugate at an elution volume of 73 ml (major peak); and
a hGRF-PEG conjugate at an elution volume of 108 ml (minor peak).

[0068] The eluted peaks were collected, concentrated by ultrafiltration using a 1,000 D cut-off membrane, lyophilised, dissolved in 10 mM acetic acid and characterised as herein after reported for their identification and quantification.

[0069] The peak at the elution volume of 73 ml was found to correspond to compound A4.

[0070] The peak at the elution volume of 132 ml was found to correspond to compound A3.

[0071] The peak at the elution volume of 108 ml was found to correspond to a mixture of compounds A2 and A1.

[0072] The peak eluted at 232 ml was found to be unconjugated hGRF.

[0073] However, this method of purification does not allow to separate hGRF-PEG conjugates having the same molecular weight but different pegylation site (positional isomers).

EXAMPLE 3: Reversed-Phase Chromatography

[0074] A more specific fractionation was carried out by hydrophobic chromatography using an RP-HPLC C 18 column. This procedure can separate eventual isomers having the same molecular weight. In fact, with this method the single peak corresponding to the conjugates with 1 PEG covalently bound obtained by gel filtration was found to split in two peaks.

[0075] The reversed-phase chromatography was carried out using a RP-HPLC C18 preparative column (Vydac) eluted with a gradient of
H_2O/0.05%TFA (Eluent A) and
acetonitrile/=.05% TFA (Eluent B), as follows:

0-5 min	35% A
5-35 min	35% A → 2% A
35-38 min	2% A
38-40 min	2%A → 35% A.

Flow rate: 10 ml/min; loop 1 µl; UV-Vis. Detector at 280 nm.

[0076] After pegylation in DMSO using a hGRF:PEG molar ratio of 1:1, 4 peaks were obtained:

1	13.2 min	major peak;
2	13.7 min	major peak;
3	14.4 min	minor peak; and
4	8.9 min	minor peak.

[0077] After pegylation in DMSO using a hGRF:PEG molar ratio of 1:2, 4 peaks were obtained:

1	13.2 min	minor peak;
2	13.7 min	minor peak;
3	14.4 min	major peak; and
4	15.5 min	minor peak.

[0078] After pegylation in DMSO using a hGRF:PEG molar ratio of 1:3, 2 peaks were obtained:

1	14.4 min	minor peak; and
2	15.5 min	major peak.

[0079] The eluted peaks were collected, evaporated to eliminate acetonitrile and TFA and then lyophilised. The dry product was dissolved in 10 mM acetic acid solution and analysed as reported herein after for identification and quantification of the isolated species.

[0080] The hGRF-PEG conjugate eluted at 13.2 min. was found to be compound A1 (GRF-1PEG, 1st peak).

[0081] The hGRF-PEG conjugate eluted at 13.7 min. was found to be compound A2 (GRF-1PEG, 2nd peak).

[0082] The hGRF-PEG conjugate eluted at 14.4 min. was found to be compound A3 (GRF-2PEG).

[0083] The hGRF-PEG conjugate eluted at 15.5 min. was found to be compound A4 (GRF-3PEG).

[0084] The peak eluted at 8.9 min. was found to be unconjugated hGRF. As a typical example, the reversed-phase

chromatography of the pegylation products obtained using a 2:1 PEG:hGRF molar ratio is reported in Figure 2.

[0085] The dry products were obtained by solvent evaporation/lyophilization.

EXAMPLE 4: Analytical Characterization of the hGRF-PEG conjugates

[0086] The products, obtained as previously reported, were examined for the bound PEG chains on the basis of the following assays:

1. Colorimetric method based on trinitrobenzene sulphonate was used for free amino groups determination (as described in Habeed et al. 1966);
2. Colorimetric method based on iodine assay was used for PEG content determination (as described in Sims et al., 1980);
3. PEG chain number based on norleucine as chain reporter in amino acid analysis was used (as described in Sartore et al., 1991);
4. Mass spectroscopy was used to determine the molecular weight of the conjugates.

[0087] The MALDI- mass spectrometry was used to reveal the molecular weight of the conjugates and their polydispersivity resulting from the polydispersivity of the starting PEG.

[0088] The PEG attachment site analysis of the hGRF-PEG conjugates was evaluated by amino acid sequence. Each sample was diluted 100-fold. Then 10 μl of this solution (about 50 pmol) loaded into the sequencer.

[0089] The purity of the final product was also confirmed by RP-HPLC analytical chromatography.

[0090] The analysis was carried out using a C18 analytical column (Vydac) eluted with a gradient H_2O/0.05% TFA (Eluent A) and acetonitrile/0.05% TFA (Eluent B) as follows:

0-5 min	80% A
5-50 min	80% A → 5% A
50-52 min	5% A
52-54 min	5% A → 80% A.

Flow rate 1 ml/min, loop 20 μl, UV-Vis. Detector at 226 nm.

[0091] The unconjugated hGRF eluted at 20.7 min.

[0092] Compound A1 eluted at 22.9 min, compound A2 eluted at 23.4 min, compound A3 at 24.4 min, and compound A4 at 25.5 min.

[0093] The conformational characterization of the "native" and polymer-bound peptides was performed by circular dichroism analysis.

[0094] The spectroscopic characterization of the unconjugated hGRF and hGRF-PEG conjugates was carried out by circular dichroism analysis in the range of 190-300 nm. The samples (50 μg/ml) were dissolved in 10 mM acetic acid or methanol/10 mM acetic acid in 30:70 and 60:40 molar ratios. In all the above solutions the unconjugated hGRF and the hGRF-PEG conjugates presented a superimposable behavior, as shown in Figure 4 for compound A3. In acetic acid solution the peptides were in random conformation, whereas by increasing the methanol content the peptide assumed an α-helix structure.

[0095] The results demonstrate that the PEG conjugation does not change markedly the structural properties of the peptide.

EXAMPLE 5: Stability Evaluation of the hGRF-PEG Conjugates

[0096] The proteolytic stability of hGRF and of the hGRF-PEG conjugates was investigated using proteolytic enzymes, such as subtilisin and chymotrypsin.

[0097] The study with subtilisin was performed by incubation at 4°C of a 0.297 mM peptide solution in 0.1 M Tris HCl 0.05 M $CaCl_2$ pH 8.0 with a peptide/protease molar ratio 1: 50,000.

[0098] In the case of chymotrypsin the peptide was dissolved in 0.08 M Tris HCl, 0.1 M $CaCl_2$ pH 7.8 and a peptide/protease molar ratio of 1:15,000 was used.

[0099] The degradation behavior was followed by analytical RP-HPLC using C18 column eluted under the same conditions as reported in Example 4. The height corresponding to the peak of the starting compound was calculated before incubation with the protelolytic enzyme and after scheduled times of incubation. The percentage of residual height at the scheduled times was estimated and is reported in Figures 3a and b.

EXAMPLE 6: Pegylation with Alkylating PEG

[0100] hGRF was conjugated with mono-methoxylated PEG activated with different acylating groups as well as alkylating groups.

[0101] The alkylating PEG presents the advantage of yielding conjugates that maintain the positive charge at the lysine residue.

[0102] The isolation and characterisation were carried out as described in Examples 1-4.

EXAMPLE 7: Evaluation of The Activity of hGRF-PEG Conjugates

Materials

Test compounds

[0103]

Human GRF_{1-29} hGRF(1-29)-NH_2, batch 1299201, supplied by Bachem;
Human GRF_{3-29} hGRF(3-29), supplied by Bachem;
Human GRF_{3-29}, supplied by ISL; and
hGRF-PEG Conjugates prepared as described above.

Reagents

CHO-hGRFR-LUC *in vitro* assay

[0104]

MEM alpha medium with ribonucleosides and deoxyribonucleosides (Gibco) supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (Gibco) plus 600 µg/ml gentamycine G418 sulfate (Gibco);
Luciferase cell culture reagent (Promega);
Luciferase assay reagent (Promega); and
Luclite (Packanol).

In vitro rat pituitary cell bioassay

Earle's Balanced Salts (EBSS) (Gibco), supplemented with 50 µg/ml of gentamycine sulfate (Sigma).
Medium 199 (M199) with Earle's Salts (Gibco) with 12.5 % of fetal bovine serum (FBS) (Gibco) and 50 µg/ml of gentamycine sulfate.
Rat GH assay kit supplied by Amersham.
Enzyme solution for tissue digestion (make up to 30 ml of EBSS):

120 mg Collagenase (Sigma)
30 mg Hyaluronidase (Sigma)
30 mg Dnase I (Sigma)
900 mg BSA (Sigma)

After reconstitution, the solution was filter-sterilized and placed at 37°C.

In vivo bioassay

Rat GH radioimmunoassay kit supplied by Amersham.
Human GRF(1-44) radioimmunoassay kit supplied by Phoenix Pharmaceutical.

Animals

[0105] SPF adult male Sprague-Dawley rats, 200-250 g b.w, supplied by Charles River, are used after an acclimatisation period of at least 7 days.

Methods

CHO-hGRFR-LUC *in vitro* assay

[0106] CHO-hGRFR-LUC (clone 1-11-20) is a cloned cell line that had been obtained by cotransfection of the pcDNA3-hGRF-R and pTF5-53 LUC vectors into CHO-DUKX cell line.

[0107] The plasmid pcDNA3-hGRF-R was constructed by inserting the human growth hormone releasing factor receptor (hGRF-R) cDNA into pcDNA3 expression vector. The Bluescript plasmid containing hGRF-R cDNA was kindly provided by Dr. B. Gaylinn (University of Virginia) the pcDNA3 mammalian expression vector was obtained from Invitrogen. The hGRF-R coding sequence was driven by the human cytomegalovirus (CMV) promoter. Its restriction map is reported in Figure 12.

[0108] The plasmid pTF5-53LUC was constructed by inserting the c-fos cAMP response element along with its endogenous promoter upstream of the luciferase coding sequence in plasmid poLuc. The cAMP response element and the c-fos promoter were obtained from the plasmid pTF5-53 (described in Fish et al, 1989). The promoterless reporter gene vector (poLuc) with multiple cloning sites upstream of the luciferase coding sequence was obtained from Dr. Brasier (University of Texas, Galveston). Its restriction map is reported in Figure 13.

[0109] These CHO-DUKX cells obtained by the above co-transfection were routinely grown in MEM alpha medium containing ribonucleosides and deoxyribonucleosides and supplemented with 10% fetal calf serum plus 600 μg/ml gentamycine G418 sulfate.

[0110] The cells were seeded (40,000 cells/well) in white 96-well plates (Dynatech) and incubated for 18-24 hrs in 200 μl growth medium before the assay.

[0111] The next day, the medium was removed and replaced with a medium containing different concentrations of hGRF(1-29) in-house reference standard (Bachem) or different hGRF-PEG conjugates before incubating the plates at 37°C, 5% CO_2 for two hours. At the end of incubation, CHO-hGRFR-LUC cells were washed twice with 200 μl of PBS (Sigma) and then lysed by adding 50μl of a luciferase cell culture reagent (Promega) to each well. After a further 15-minute incubation at room temperature, the plates were read in a luminometer (Dynatech) after introducing 150 μl of a luciferase assay reagent (Promega).

[0112] As an alternative method, CHO-hGRFR-LUC cells, seeded at 50,000cells/well, at the end of incubation with different hGRF-PEG conjugates , were washed with PBS, as above discussed. To each well 100 μl PBS containing calcium and magnesium ions was added, prior to addition of 100 μl of Luclite (Packanol). After 10 minutes incubation at room temperature, plates were read in luminometer (Lumicount - Packard).

[0113] Results were expressed as relative luminescence unit (RLU).

In vitro rat pituitary cell bioassay for hGRF(1-29)

[0114] The animals (SPF male Sprague-Dawley rats 200 g, b.w.) were sacrificed by CO_2 inhalation and the pituitaries removed. The tissue was finely minced and put into a bottle with the enzyme solution for tissue digestion. The bottle was placed in a incubator at 37°C for 1 hour.

[0115] The digested tissue was recovered and the cells washed twice, counted and adjusted to a concentration of $5x10^5$/ml. The cells were plated out in a 48-well plate (200 μl/well) and the plate placed in an incubator for 72 hrs.

[0116] After 72 hrs the cells were incubated with different concentrations of hGRF for 4 hours. At the end of the incubation period the supernatants were collected and stored at - 80°C.

[0117] The GH content in each sample was assayed by a commercial rat GH radioimmunoassay kit.

In vivo assay

[0118] The animal was injected iv. with hGRF(1-29) (400 μg/rat). A few minutes before blood collection, the animal was anaesthetized (ketamine-xylazine). Two ml of blood were withdrawn from the inferior *vena cava* from each rat. The sample was divided into two aliquots: 1 ml was collected as such and serum was obtained after an incubation period of about 3 hours at 37°C and subsequent centrifugation; the remaining 1 ml was collected into a vial containing 50 μl of a 4 mg/ml heparin solution, immediately stored on ice and plasma was obtained after centrifugation at 4°C.

[0119] Blood samples were collected at different time points from the injection of the test compound using different animals. In each experimental session a total of three rats for each time point was used.

[0120] Plasma and serum samples were immediately frozen and stored at - 20°C.

[0121] GH serum levels were measured by a commercial RIA kit; hGRF plasma levels were measured by a commercial RIA kit for hGRF(1-44).

Results

NOTE: throughout this section and the related Figures "GRF-1PEG 1st peak" corresponds to [Lys($PEG_{5,000}$-CH_2-O-CO-Nle-CO)^{21}-hGRF(1-29)NH_2], "GRF-1PEG 2nd peak" corresponds to [Lys($PEG_{5,000}$-CH_2-O-CO-Nle-CO)^{12}-hGRF(1-29)-NH_2], "GRF-2PEG" corresponds to [Lys($PEG_{5,000}$-CH_2-O-OC-Nle-CO)^{12,21}-hGRF(1-29)-NH_2] and "GRF-3PEG" corresponds to N^{α}-($PEG_{5,000}$-CH_2-O-CO-Nle-CO)[Lys($PEG_{5,000}$-CH_2-O-CO-Nle-CO)^{12,22}-hGRF(1-29)-NH_2].

CHO-hGRFR-LUC *in vitro* assay

[0122] The activities of two different batches of hGRF-PEG conjugates, both prepared using DMSO, in the CHO-hGRFR-LUC *in vitro* assay were shown in Figs. 5 and 6.

[0123] All preparations were found to be active although to a lesser extent as compared to "native" hGRF (hGRF subjected to the same purification steps used for the pegylated compounds), with hGRF-1PEG (both the 1st and 2nd peak) being more active than the hGRF-2PEG and hGRF-3PEG. No difference was observed between hGRF and "native" hGRF.

[0124] A similar *in vitro* bioactivity of the hGRF-PEG conjugates from both DMSO-prepared batches (Fig. 5 *vs* Fig. 6) as well as the conjugates from the batch prepared using nicotinamide solution (Fig. 7) were observed. Fig. 6 also shows that two different hGRF(3-29) preparations did not possess a significant *in vitro* activity as compared to hGRF(1-29).

In vitro rat pituitary cell bioassay for $hGRF_{1-29}$

[0125] In both assays performed with hGRF-PEG conjugates from two DMSO preparations, the GRF-1PEG 1st peak was found to be the most active compound, followed by GRF-1PEG 2nd peak, GRF-2PEG and then GRF-3PEG (Figs. 8 and 9). These findings are in good agreement with those obtained in the reporter gene assay.

In vivo assay

[0126] In preliminary experiments the serum GH and plasma hGRF levels were determined in rats following i.v. injection of 400 µg of hGRF. The relevant results are illustrated in Fig. 10. As shown, both GH and hGRF peaked at 10 min after hGRF injection. Thereafter, serum GH concentrations rapidly declined and returned to basal levels after 60 min, whereas the plasma hGRF concentrations maintained a sustained level in the same time-interval.

[0127] In Fig. 11A and 11B the blood levels of GH and GRF at different time-points up to 48 hours in rats treated with 400 µg i.v. of GRF-1PEG 1st and 2nd peak, GRF-2PEG and GRF-3PEG (DMSO preparations) are reported.

[0128] All the pegylated preparations induce a GH serum peak 10 minutes after their i.v. injection similarly to the $hGRF_{1-29}$. However, while the GRF-1PEG 1st and 2nd peak and GRF-2PEG induce GH levels comparable to those obtained with $hGRF_{1-29}$, GRF-3PEG confirms its lower activity as found *in vitro*.

[0129] For what the GRF plasma levels are concerned, a completely different pattern is observed with GRF-1PEG 1st and 2nd peaks as compared to GRF-2PEG and GRF-3PEG irrespective of the preparation (DMSO or nicotinamide) used. At 48 hours following the injection of GRF-1PEG 1st and 2nd peaks, the GRF plasma concentrations return to basal value, whereas more sustained levels are obtained with GRF-2PEG and GRF-3PEG.

EXAMPLE 8: Solid-Phase Synthesis Of Site-Protected hGRF(1-29)-NH2 Derivatives As Starting Compounds In The Pegylation Process

[0130] A solid-phase synthesis of hGRF(1-29)-NH_2 derivatives containing a specific protection group (the N-allyloxycarbonyl-group) at the primary amino groups of both Lysine 12 and 21 has been carried out. This is to allow site-specific pegylation at the N^{α}-terminus. Another amino-protected derivative is prepared by blocking the N^{α}-terminus through acylation and the Lysine 12 with the N-allyloxycarbonyl group. This derivative is used for site-specific pegylation at Lysine 21.

Material and Methods

Peptide Synthesis Procedures

[0131] All GRF derivatives peptide-resins were initially assembled using Fmoc chemistry on an Applied Biosystems Inc. Model 431A Peptide Synthesizer, using a low substitution (0.16 mmol/g) PAL-PEG-PS resin and a double-couple and capping protocol for each residue to optimize the amount and purity of the crude product. Additionally [N-isopropyl-

Tyr^1, $Lys(Alloc)^{12}$]-hGRF(1-29)-NH_2 peptide-resin was manually treated with a reductive alkylation procedure to add an N-terminal isopropyl group.

[0132] All peptide resins were cleaved with a mixture of TFA/1,2-ethanedithiol/thioanisole/water [10:0.5:0.5:0.5 (v/v)] for 2 hours, and the crude peptides isolated by precipitation in MTBE and centrifugation. Lyophilized crude peptides were purified by reversed-phase gradient HPLC using a Vydac C18 Preparative column with a 0.1% TFA Water/Acetonitrile buffer system. All purified peptides were characterized by Analytical Reversed-Phase HPLC and MALDI-TOF Mass Spectrometry.

Materials

Fmoc-L-Amino Acids (Bachem Bioscience, Perseptive Biosystems, NovaBiochem), DMF, 20 liter drum (J.T. Baker), Piperidine (Applied Biosystems, Chem-Impex), HBTU (Rainin, Richelieu Biotechnologies), NMM (Aldrich), Acetic Anhydride (Applied Biosystems), Resins (Perseptive Biosystems, NovaBiochem). a-Cyano-4-hydroxy-cinnamic acid (Sigma) , Sinapinic acid (Aldrich), acetonitrile (J .T. Baker), TFA (Sigma, Pierce), deionized H_2O (Millipore Milli-Q Water System). The other solvents and reagents are listed as follow:

REAGENTS/SOLVENTS	VENDORS
NMP	Applied Biosystems Inc., J.T Baker
HBTU	Applied Biosystems Inc., Richelieu Biotechnologies Inc.
0.5 M HOBt in DMF	Applied Biosystems Inc.
2.0 M DIEA in NMP	Applied Biosystems Inc.
Piperidine	Applied Biosystems Inc.
Dichloromethane	Applied Biosystems Inc.
Acetic Anhydride	Applied Biosystems Inc.

[0133] Amino acids: most FMOC amino acids used on the ABI 431A synthesizer were purchased from Applied Biosystems as pre-weighed 1.0 mmol cartridges. FMOC-Lys(Alloc)-OH was purchased from Perseptive Biosystems (Framingham, MA) in bulk and the cartridges filled in house. All amino acids used were of the L-configuration.

[0134] Resins: the primary resins used for the GRF analogs were PAL-PEG-PS (Peptide Amide Linker - Polyethylene Glycol - Polystyrene) resins. The PAL-PEG-PS supports, purchased from PerSeptive Biosystems, consistently show superior results in purity and yield of crude product. A low substitution resin of 0.16 mmol/g was used for all derivatives. Lower substitution resins are commonly used for long, difficult sequences to ensure better coupling by decreasing steric hindrance and β-sheet formation in the growing peptide chains.

Methods

Chain Assembly-Applied Biosytems Inc. Model 431A Peptide Synthesizer

Protected peptide chains are initially assembled using FMOC strategy on an Applied Biosystem Inc. Model 431A Peptide Synthesizer, which utilizes programmed fast FMOC cycles (FastMoc™). HBTU is used for activation and coupling, 20% Piperidine for deprotection, and NMP is the main solvent used during deprotection, amino acid dissolution and washing of the resin. Amino acids are introduced in pre-weighed 1.0 mmol cartridges. The 0.25 mmol FastMoc™ cycles use 1.0 mmol cartridges and a 40 ml reaction vessel.

Chain Assembly - Procedure

[0135] The steps for the 0.25 mmole scale programmed cycles can be summarized as follows:

1. Piperidine Deprotection - The resin is first washed with NMP, then an 18% piperidine/NMP solution is delivered and deprotects for 3 minutes. The reaction vessel is drained and a 20% piperidine solution is delivered and depro-

tection continued for approx. 8 minutes.

2. Dissolution of Amino Acid - NMP (2.1 g.) and 0.9 mmol of 0.45 M HBTU/HOBt in DMF (2.0 g.) are added to the cartridge and mixed for 6 minutes.

3. NMP washes - The reaction vessel is drained and the resin is washed 5 times with NMP.

4. Activation of amino acid and transfer to reaction vessel (RV) - 1 ml of 2 M DIEA in NMP is added to the cartridge to begin activation of the dissolved amino acid, then transferred from the cartridge to the RV.

5. Coupling and final washing - The coupling reaction between the activated amino acid and the N-terminal deprotected peptide-resin proceeds for approx. 20 minutes and then the RV is drained and the resin washed with NMP.

6. Capping (if desired) - Approx.12 ml of a 0.5 M Acetic Anhydride, 0.125 M DIEA and 0.015M HOBt in NMP solution is added to the reaction vessel and vortexed for 5 mins. This should acetylate any uncoupled sites on the resin, resulting in truncated rather than deletion sequences, which simplifies later purification steps.

[0136] The complete protocol for these cycles can be found in Applied Biosystems User Bulletin No. 35 (FastMoc™ 0.25 and 0.10 on the Model 431A).

The standard protocol steps for a typical synthesis:

[0137]

Step 1. Wash resin 3X with DMF
Step 2. Deprotect 2X for 5 minutes with 20% Piperidine/DMF
Step 3. Wash resin 6X with DMF
Step 4. Couple for 45 minutes with Amino Acid activated with HBTU/NMM in DMF.
Step 5. Wash resin 3X with DMF

[0138] For difficult sequences, an extra capping step can be inserted after coupling, which uses 70% Acetic Anhydride in DMF for 20 minutes to acetylate any uncoupled sites on the peptide-resin, resulting in truncated sequences rather than deletion sequences in the final crude product.

Cleavage/Extraction

[0139] The cleavage cocktail used for removing side-chain protecting groups and releasing the peptide from the resin is a standard mixture used for peptides containing Arginine and/or Methionine. For 0.1-1.5 g peptide-resin, 10 ml Trifluoroacetic Acid, 0.5 ml D.I. Water, 0.5 ml Thioanisole, 0.5 ml Ethanedithiol (87% Trifluoroacetic Acid, 4.3% D.I. Water, 4.3% Thioanisole, 4.3% Ethanedithiol)

Cleavage Procedure

[0140] 100 mg - 1 g of peptide-resin is placed into a 20 ml glass vessel and cooled in an ice bath. The cleavage cocktail is prepared and also cooled in an ice bath, then added to the peptide-resin for a final volume of approx. 10 ml.

[0141] The vessel is removed from the ice bath and allowed to warm to room temperature. The vessel is capped and the reaction mixture stirred at room temperature for 2 hours.

[0142] After 2 hours, the solution is vacuum filtered through a medium-to-course porosity filter into approx. 30 ml of cold MTBE. The reaction vessel is washed with 1 ml TFA and filtered through the same filter tunnel into the cold MTBE. The entire suspension is then transferred to a 50 ml centrifuge tube and centrifuged for approx. 10 minutes at 2,000 rpm at room temperature. The supernatant is aspirated, the precipitate re-suspended in 40 ml cold MTBE and centrifuged again. This step is repeated once more. The final supernatant is aspirated and the precipitate is purged with nitrogen to evaporate most of the remaining ether.

[0143] The peptide is then dissolved in 20-30 ml of aqueous 1% - 10% Acetic Acid, diluted to approx. 100-150 ml with deionized water, shell frozen, and lyophilized.

Purification

RP-HPLC Methods

[0144]

System - Waters Delta Prep 4000

Column - Vydac reversed-phase C18, 10 μm, 2.2 x 25 cm (Cat No. 218TP1022)
Buffers - A: Water/ 0.1%TFA B: Acetonitrile/ 0.1%TFA
Flow Rate - 15 ml/minute
Detection - Waters 484 UV detector, 220 nm
Gradient - Variable, usually 0.2% B/min up to 1.0% B/min

[0145] Lyophilized crude peptides are prepared by dissolving 50-100 mg of peptide in 200 ml of aqueous 0.1 % TFA. The peptide solution is then loaded directly onto the preparative column through the "A" buffer reservoir line and the gradient program started.

[0146] Collected fractions are run overnight on an autosampler analytical HPLC system. Overlapping fractions judged to be >92% pure by peak integration are pooled, diluted 4:1 with D.I. Water, shell frozen, and then lyophilized on a Virtis 25 SL Freezedryer.

Characterization

Reversed-phase HPLC

Conditions:

[0147]

System - Waters 510 pumps, 717 Autosampler, 490 Multiwavelength UV Detector
Column-Vydac C18, 5 μm, 0.46 x 25 cm (Cat. No. 218TP54)
Buffers - A: H_2O/0.1 % TFA B: ACN/ 0.1% TFA
Flow Rate - 1 ml/minute
Detection - UV: 214 nm, 280 nm
Gradient - 2% B/minute

[0148] Purified lyophilized peptide samples are prepared by dissolving 0.2 - 1.0 mg of peptide in aqueous 0.1% TFA to a concentration of 0.5 - 1.0 mg/ml.

[0149] 15 - 18 μl are injected onto the column and eluted with a gradient program of 0-50% ACN in 25 minutes. Chromatogram data is collected and stored with the Waters Expert-Ease software system.

Mass Spectrometry

[0150]

Type: MALDI-TOF (Matrix-assisted laser desorption/ionization Time-of-flight)
System: Perseptive Biosystems Voyager Elite
Matrices: a-Cyano 4-hydroxy cinnamic acid, 10 mg/ml in 67% ACN/0.1% TFA or Sinapinic Acid, 10 mg/ml in 50% ACN/0.1% TFA

[0151] Peptide samples are prepared at 1 - 20 μmol conc. in 50% ACN/0.1% TFA. 0.5 μl of matrix solution, followed by 0.5 μl of peptide sample, is applied to analysis plate wells and allowed to dry. The analysis plate is loaded into the machine and the samples scanned and analyzed using a Reflector Delayed-Extraction method optimized for peptides. For each sample, a cumulative data signal from 32 - 128 laser shots is collected and analyzed. Each run includes a sample well with a standard peptide for calibration.

Specific Synthesis

Preparation of [Lys(Alloc)^{12,21}]-hGRF(1-29)-NH_2

[0152] The [Lys(Alloc)^{12,21}]-hGRF(1-29)-PAL-PEG-PS-resin was initially assembled by Fmoc chemistry on the Applied Biosystems 431A peptide synthesizer (sec Synthesis Methods above), including deprotection of the N-terminal residue Fmoc group.

[0153] The peptide-resin was cleaved with a mixture of TFA: 1,2-ethanedithiol:thioanisole:water [10: 0.5: 0.5: 0.5 (v/v)] for 2 hrs, and the peptide isolated by precipitation in MTBE to give 240 mg of crude peptide. Purification by preparative reverse-phase HPLC with a Vydac C18 column (22 x 250 mm) resulted in 60 mg of purified product (>95% by analytical

HPLC). MALDI-TOF mass spec: Calculated: 3523.8, Observed: 3524.2.

Preparation of [N^{α}-isopropyl-Tyr^{1},Lys(Alloc)^{12}]-hGRF(1-29)-NH_2

Assembly of initial [Lys(Alloc)^{12}]-hGRF(1-29)-PAL-PEG-PS-resin

[0154] [Lys(Alloc)^{12}]hGRF(1-29)PAL-PEG-PS-resin was initially assembled by Fmoc chemistry on the Applied Biosystems 431A peptide synthesizer (sec Synthesis Methods above), including deprotection of the N-terminal residue Fmoc group.

N^{α}-isopropylation by reductive alkylation

[0155] The N^{α}-isopropyl group was added by reductive alkylation of the peptide-resin using sodium cyanoborohydride and the corresponding ketone (acetone) as described by Hocart, et al., 1987. 880 mg peptide-resin (approx. 70 µmols) was swelled in 5 ml DCM for 30 mins, then 10 mmol (174 µl) acetone in 7 ml MeOH/ 1% HOAc added and the mixture swirled intermittently for 2 hrs at ambient temperature. 2 mmols (129 mg) sodium cyanoborohydride in 12 ml MeOH/1% HOAc was then added, the mixture swirled intermittently for 2 hrs, then allowed to sit overnight (15 hrs). Qualitative ninhydrin monitoring indicated a completed reaction (no blue color). The peptide-resin was cleaved with a mixture of TFA: 1,2-ethanedithiol: thioanisole: water [10: 0.5: 0.5: 0.5 (v/v)] for 2 hrs, and the peptide isolated by precipitation in MTBE to give approx. 200 mg of crude peptide. Purification by preparative reverse-phase gradient HPLC with Water/ Acetonitrile/ 0.1 % TFA solvents on a Vydac C 18 column (22 x 250 mm) resulted in 50 mg of pure product (>95% by analytical HPLC). MALDI-TOF mass spec: Calculated: 3481.9, Observed: 3481.8.

EXAMPLE 9: Pegylation Of The Protected hGRF(1-29)

[0156] The hGRF derivatives prepared as described in Example 8 were conjugated with activated PEG as described in Examples 1 and 6.

[0157] The purification in this case involved only a separation from excess reagents and side-products, whereas there was no need to carry out the procedure described in Example 2 and 3.

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[0158]

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SEQUENCE LISTING

(1) GENERAL INFORMATION:

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(ii) TITLE OF INVENTION: SOLUTION-PHASE SITE-SPECIFIC PREPARATION OF GRF-PEG CONJUGATES

(iii) NUMBER OF SEQUENCES: 1

(iv) COMPUTER READABLE FORM:
(A) MEDIUM TYPE: Floppy disk
(B) COMPUTER: IBM PC compatible
(C) OPERATING SYSTEM: PC-DOS/MS-DOS
(D) SOFTWARE: PatentIn Release #1.0, Version #1.30 (EPO)

(2) INFORMATION FOR SEQ ID NO: 1:

(i) SEQUENCE CHARACTERISTICS:
(A) LENGTH: 29 amino acids
(B) TYPE: amino acid
(C) STRANDEDNESS:
(D) TOPOLOGY: linear

(ii) MOLECULE TYPE: peptide

(iii) HYPOTHETICAL: NO

(iv) ANTI-SENSE: NO

(xi) SEQUENCE DESCRIPTION: SEQ ID NO: 1:

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Tyr Ala Asp Ala Ile Phe Thr Asn Ser Tyr Arg Lys Val Leu Gly Gln
1               5                  10                  15

Leu Ser Ala Arg Lys Leu Leu Gln Asp Ile Met Ser Arg
            20                  25
```

Claims

1. A method for the site-specific preparation of hGRF-PEG conjugates containing one or more than one PEG units (per hGRF) covalently bound to Lys^{12} and/or Lys^{21} and/or N^{α}, characterized in that the conjugation reaction between the hGRF peptide and the activated PEG is carried out in solution and the desired hGRF-PEG conjugate is purified by chromatographic methods.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein the solution is a concentrated aqueous nicotinamide solution or a buffered aqueous solution of a defolding agent.

3. The method of claim 1, wherein the solvent is a polar organic solvent selected among: dimethyl sulfoxide, dimethyl formamide/buffer or acetonitrile/buffer.

4. The method according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein the hGRF peptide is h-GRF(1-29)-NH_2.

5. The method of claim 1, wherein, before the pegylation reaction occurs, the hGRF peptide is protected at one or more of the positions: N^{α}, Lys^{12} and Lys^{21}.

6. The method of claims 1 or 5, which further comprises a de-protection reaction after pegylation.

7. The method according to anyone of the preceding claims, wherein the activated PEG is an alkylating or acylating PEG in its mono-methoxylated form.

8. A hGRF-PEG conjugate containing one or more than one PEG units (per hGRF) covalently bound to Lys^{12} and/or Lys^{21} and/or N^{α}.

9. A hGRF-PEG conjugate according to claim 8, in which 1 PEG chain is covalently bound to Lys^{12}.

10. A hGRF-PEG conjugate according to claim 8, in which 1 PEG chain is covalently bound to Lys^{21}.

11. A hGRF-PEG conjugate according to claim 8, in which 1 PEG chain is covalently bound to each of Lys^{12} and Lys^{21}.

12. A hGRF-PEG conjugate according to claim 8, in which 1 PEG chain is covalently bound to each of Lys^{12}, Lys^{21} and N^{α}.

13. [$Lys(Alloc)^{12,21}$]-hGRF, as intermediate in the pegylation reaction of claim 1.

14. [N^{α}-isopropyl-Tyr^{1},$Lys(Alloc)^{12}$]-hGRF, as intermediate in the pegylation reaction of claim 1.

15. A cell-based reporter gene assay system for screening of the GRF activity.

16. The assay of claim 13, wherein the reporter gene is Luciferase.

17. Use of the hGRF-PEG conjugates of claims 8 to 12, as a medicament.

18. Use of the conjugates according to any of the claims from 8 to 12, in the manufacture of a medicament for the therapy and/or diagnosis of growth-hormone related disorders.

19. Use according to claim 18, in the manufacture of a medicament for the treatment or diagnosis of growth hormone deficiency.

20. A pharmaceutical composition comprising the conjugates according to any of the claims from 8 to 12 together with one or more pharmaceutically acceptable carriers and/or excipients.

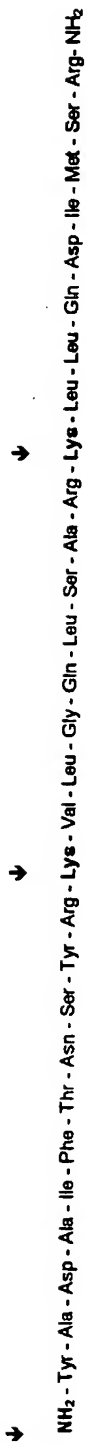


Figure 1

Figure 2

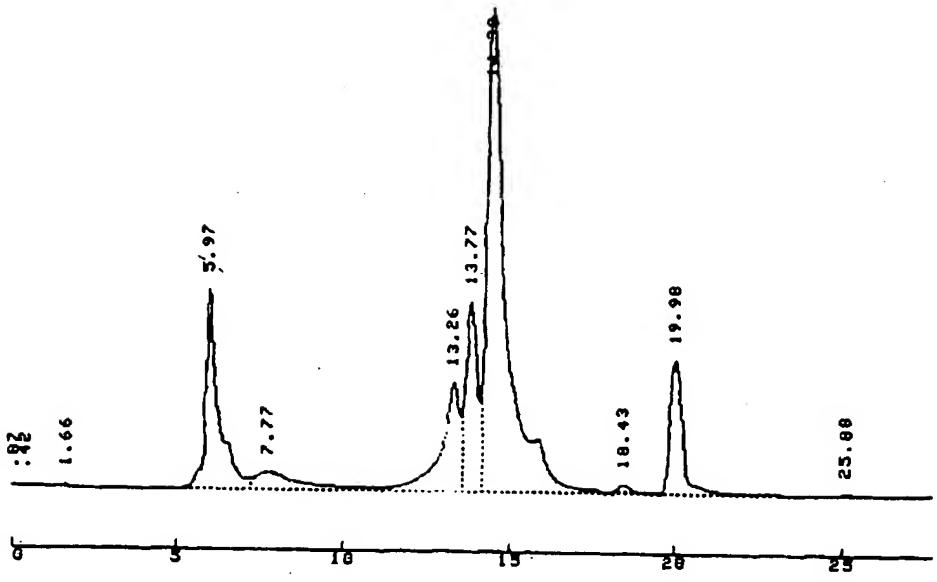


Figure 3a

DEGRADATION BEHAVIOR WITH SUBTILISN

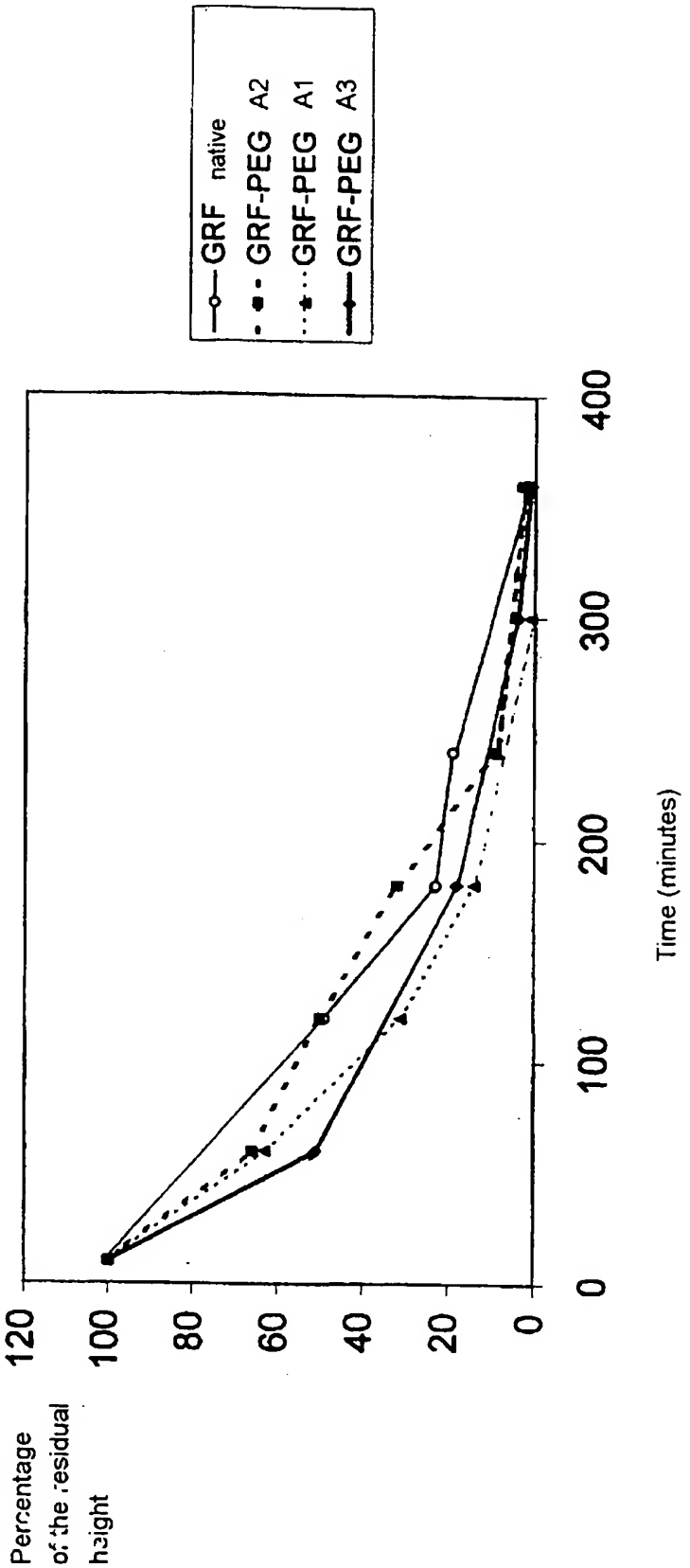
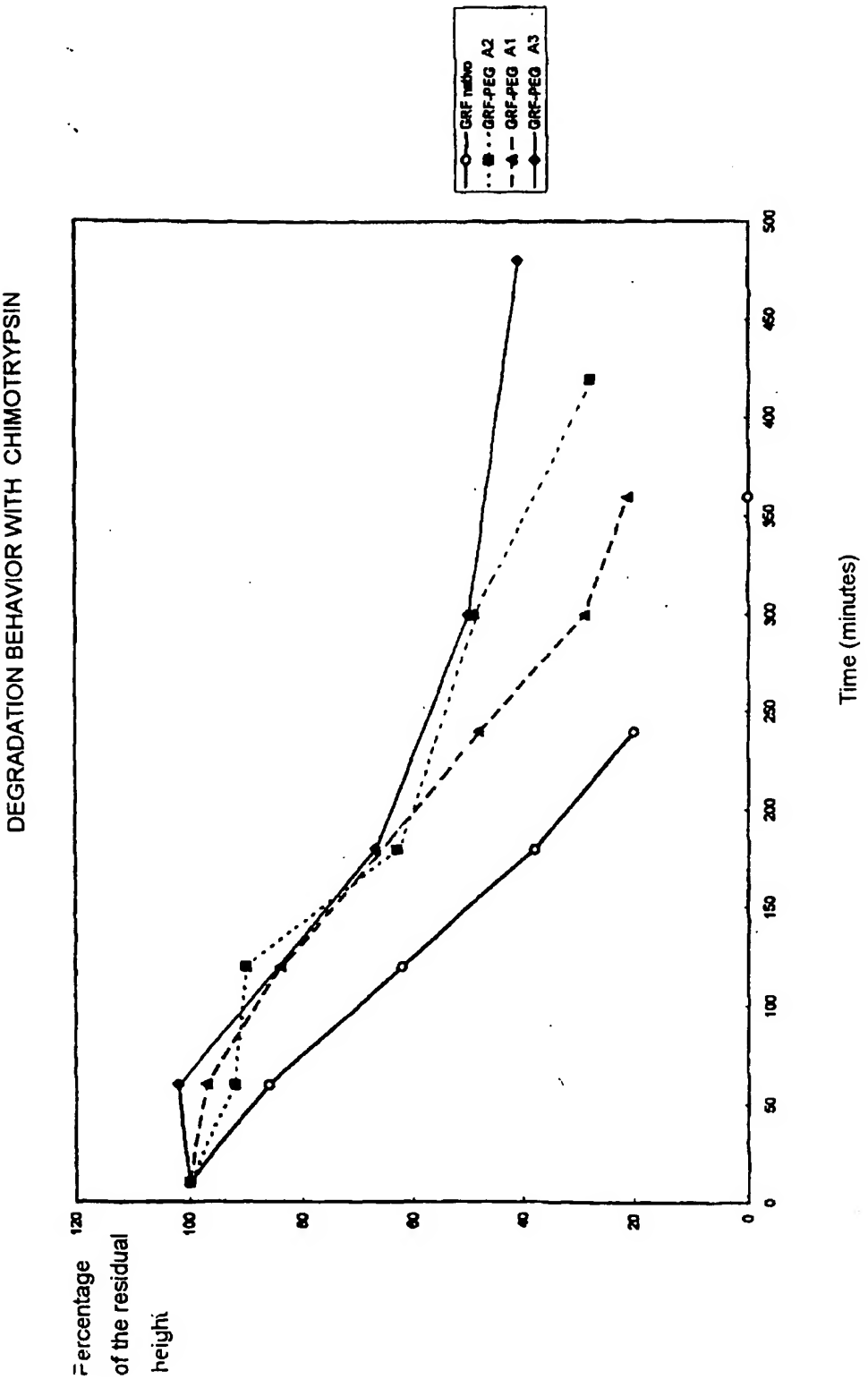


Figure 3b



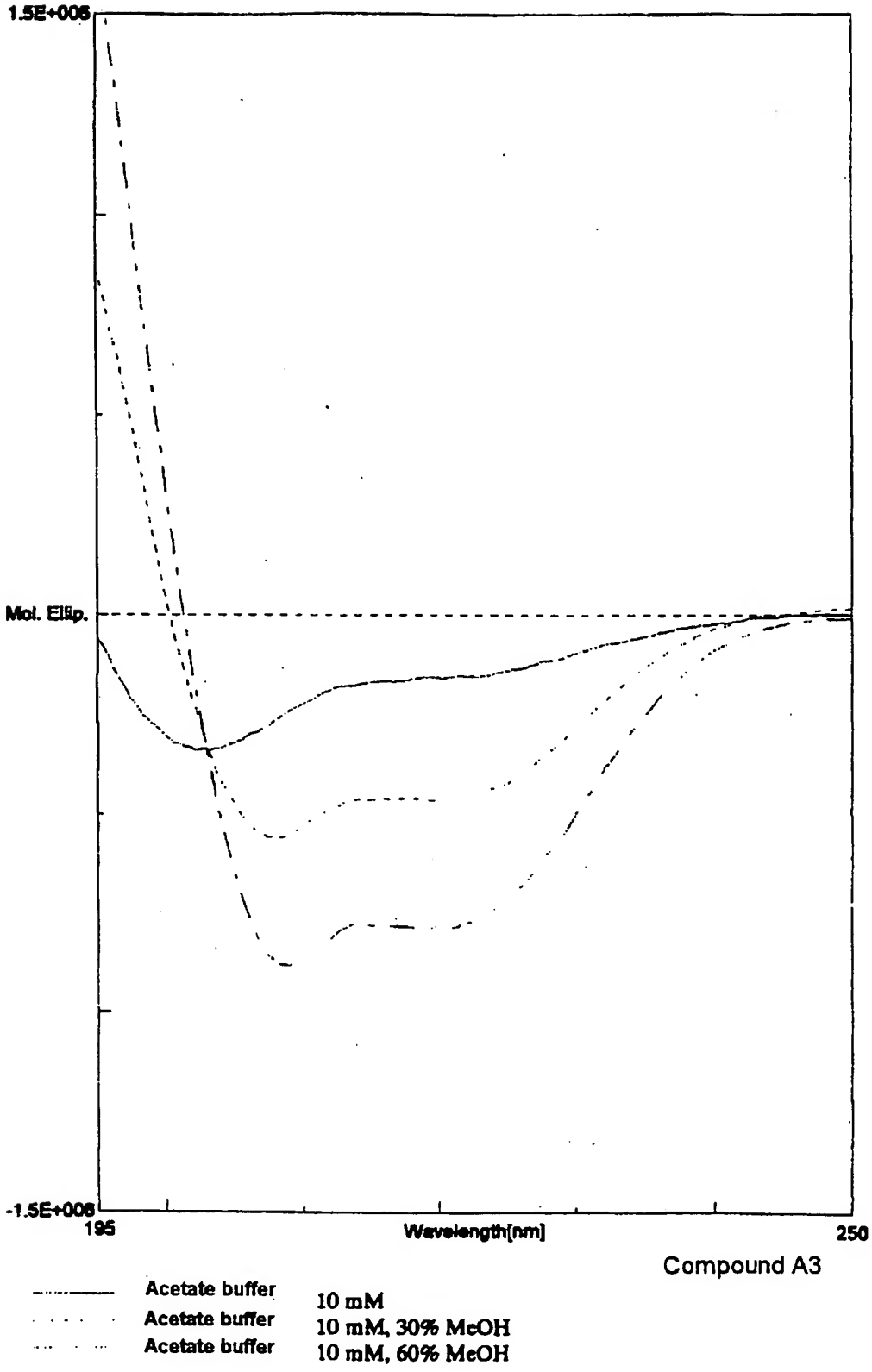

1.5E+006
Mol. Ellip.
-1.5E+006
195
Wavelength[nm]
250
Compound A3
Acetate buffer 10 mM
Acetate buffer 10 mM, 30% MeOH
Acetate buffer 10 mM, 60% MeOH

Figure 4

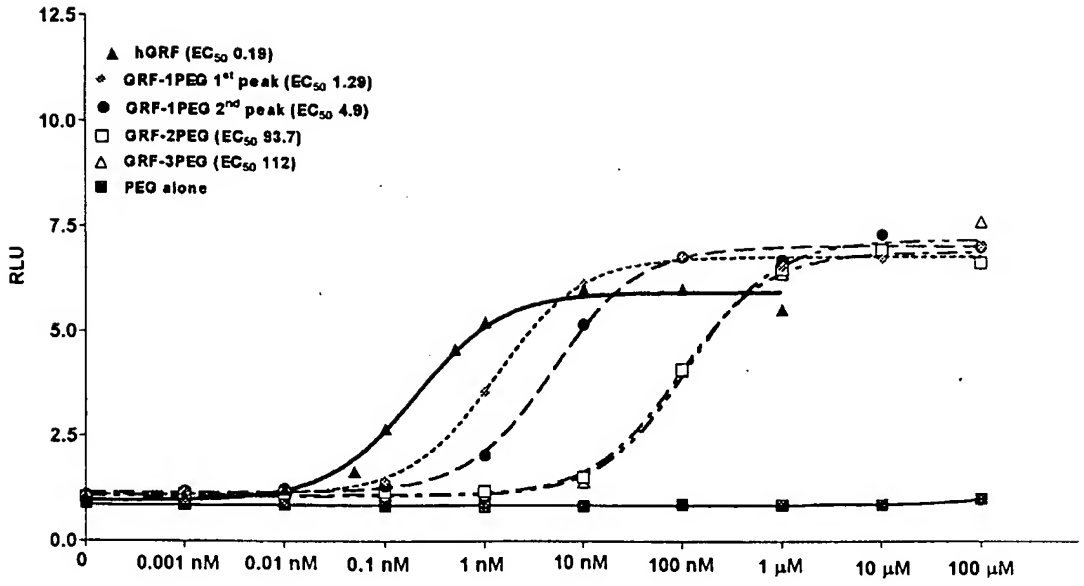

12.5
10.0
7.5
5.0
2.5
0.0
RLU
hGRF (EC50 0.19)
GRF-1PEG 1st peak (EC50 1.29)
GRF-1PEG 2nd peak (EC50 4.9)
GRF-2PEG (EC50 93.7)
GRF-3PEG (EC50 112)
PEG alone
0
0.001 nM
0.01 nM
0.1 nM
1 nM
10 nM
100 nM
1 µM
10 µM
100 µM

Figure 5

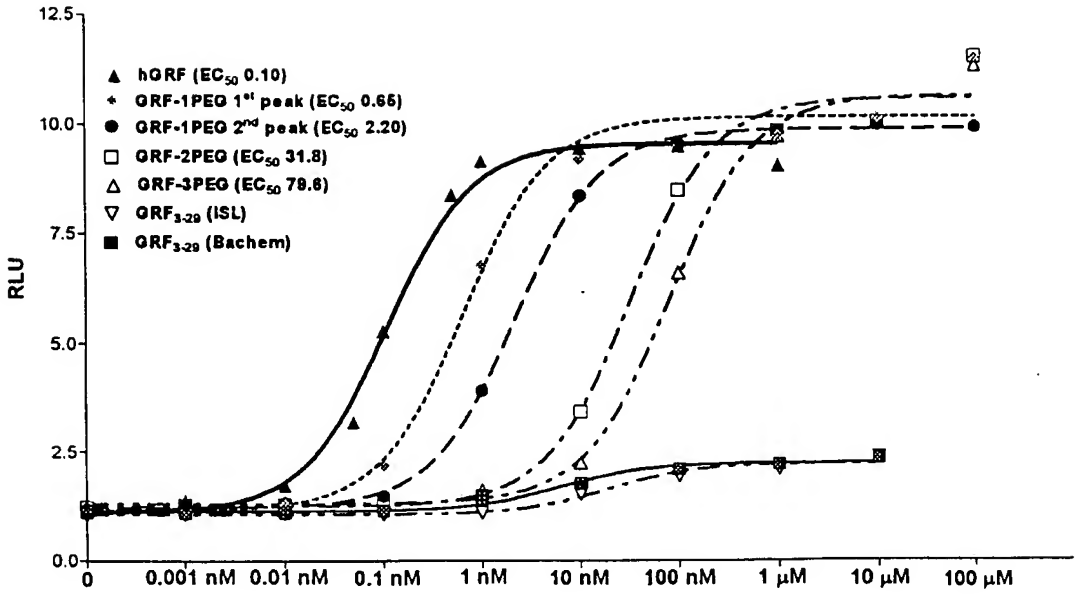

12.5
10.0
7.5
5.0
2.5
0.0
RLU
hGRF (EC50 0.10)
GRF-1PEG 1st peak (EC50 0.65)
GRF-1PEG 2nd peak (EC50 2.20)
GRF-2PEG (EC50 31.8)
GRF-3PEG (EC50 79.6)
GRF3-29 (ISL)
GRF3-29 (Bachem)
0
0.001 nM
0.01 nM
0.1 nM
1 nM
10 nM
100 nM
1 µM
10 µM
100 µM

Figure 6

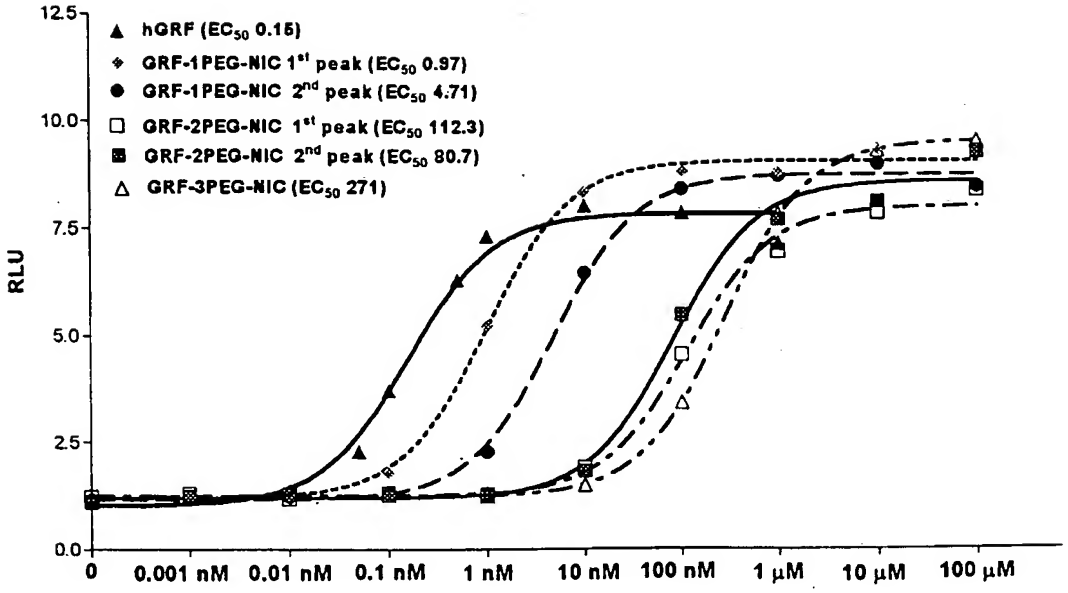

12.5
10.0
7.5
5.0
2.5
0.0
RLU
hGRF (EC50 0.15)
GRF-1PEG-NIC 1st peak (EC50 0.97)
GRF-1PEG-NIC 2nd peak (EC50 4.71)
GRF-2PEG-NIC 1st peak (EC50 112.3)
GRF-2PEG-NIC 2nd peak (EC50 80.7)
GRF-3PEG-NIC (EC50 271)
0
0.001 nM
0.01 nM
0.1 nM
1 nM
10 nM
100 nM
1 µM
10 µM
100 µM

Figure 7

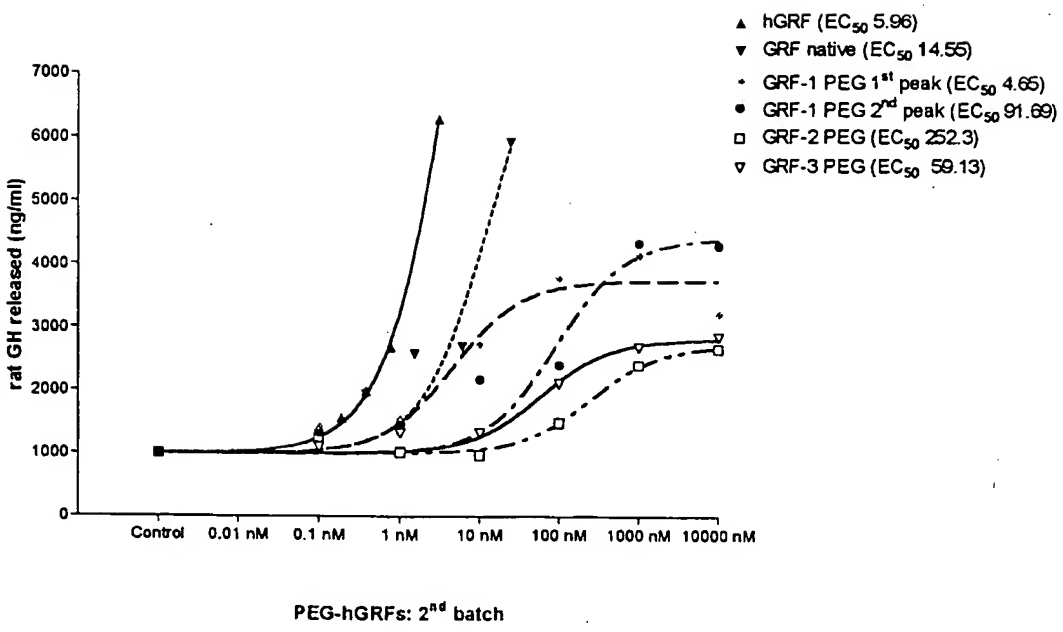


Figure 8

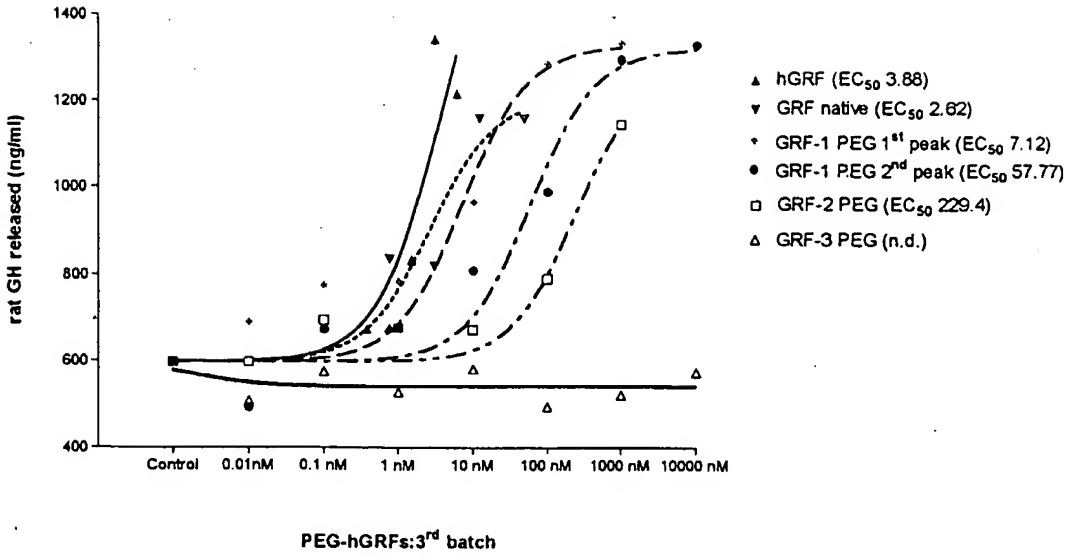

rat GH released (ng/ml)
1400
1200
1000
800
600
400
Control
0.01nM
0.1 nM
1 nM
10 nM
100 nM
1000 nM
10000 nM
PEG-hGRFs:3rd batch
hGRF (EC50 3.88)
GRF native (EC50 2.62)
GRF-1 PEG 1st peak (EC50 7.12)
GRF-1 PEG 2nd peak (EC50 57.77)
GRF-2 PEG (EC50 229.4)
GRF-3 PEG (n.d.)

Figure 9

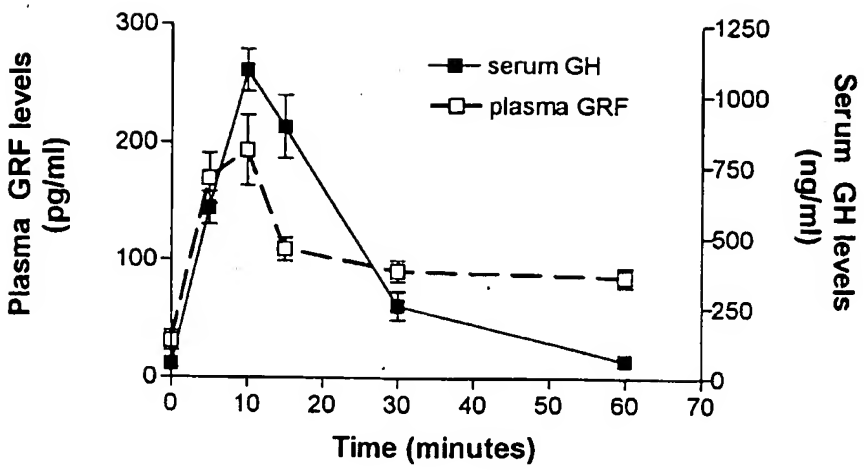
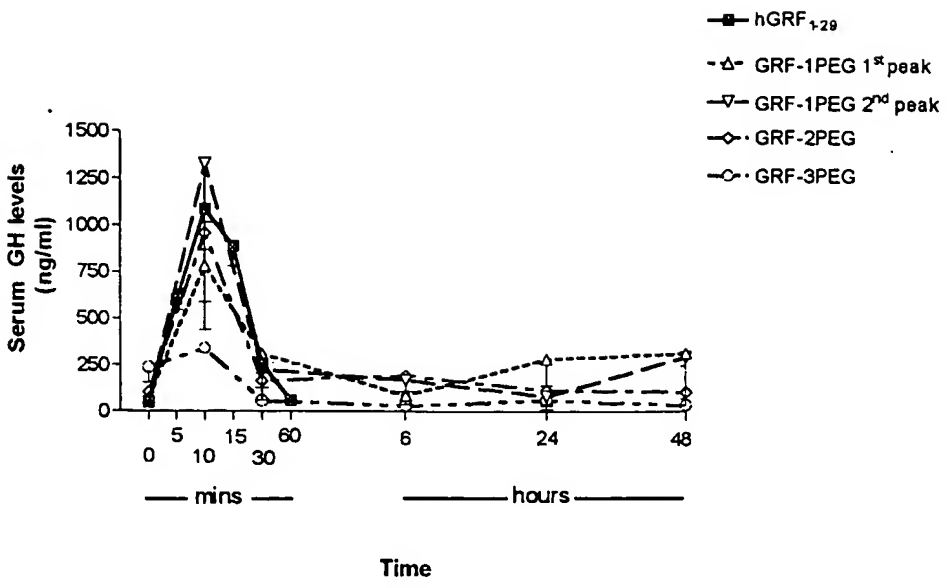


Figure 10



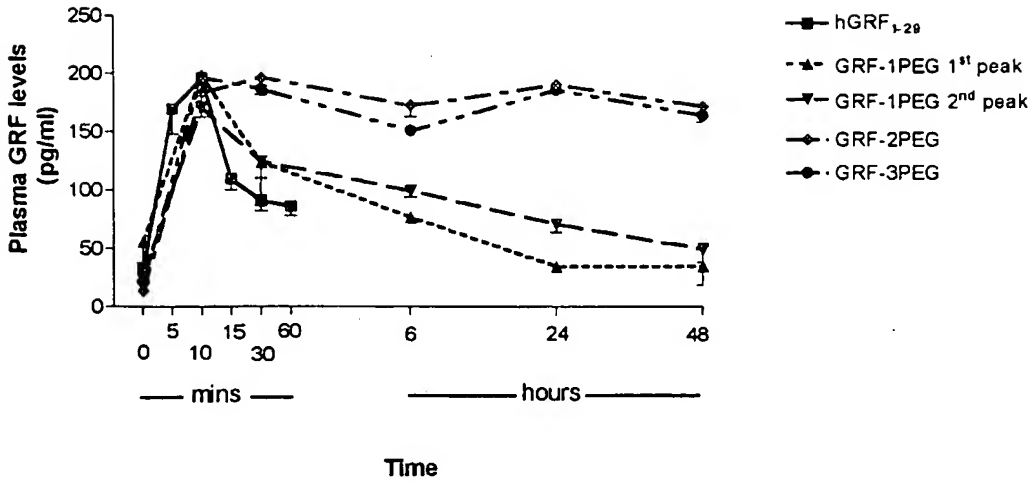


Figure 11 A and B

pcDNA3-GRF-R Vector

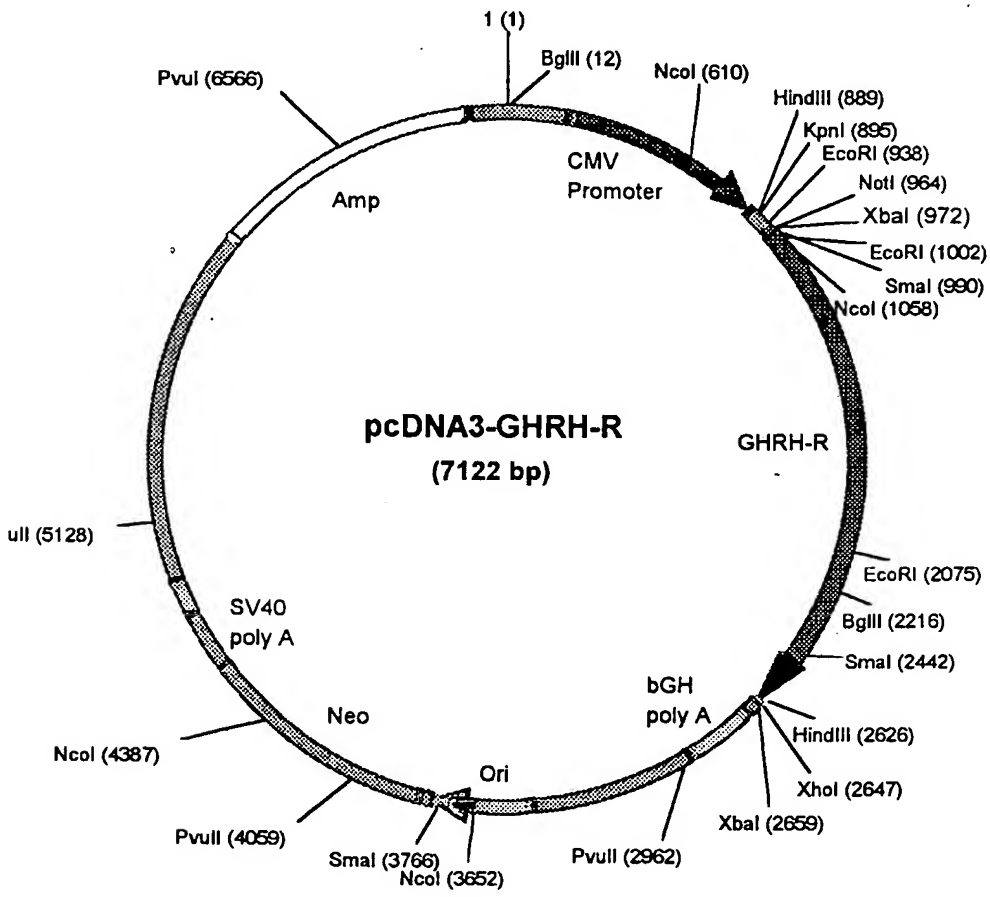


Figure 12

pTF5-53LUC VECTOR

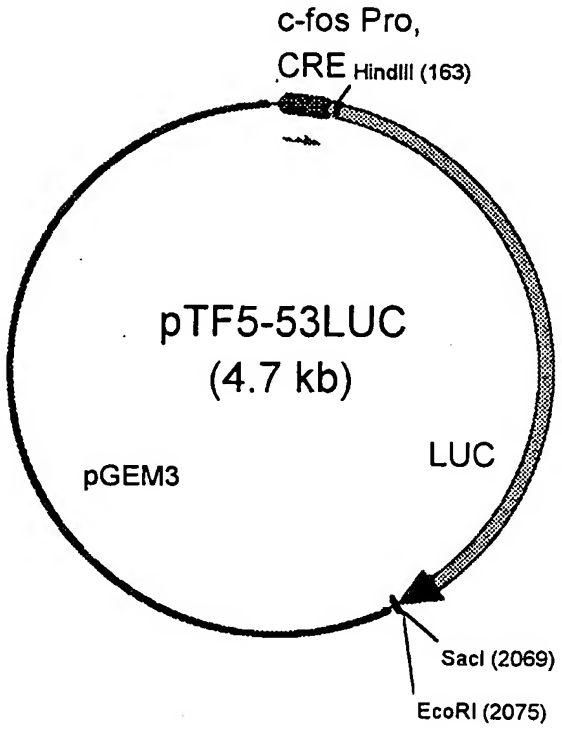


Figure 13

European Patent Office

EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT

Application Number
EP 97 12 1264

DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category	Citation of document with indication, where appropriate, of relevant passages	Relevant to claim	CLASSIFICATION OF THE APPLICATION (Int.Cl.6)
X	EP 0 400 472 A (SUMITOMO PHARMA ;SEIKAGAKU KOGYO CO LTD (JP)) 5 December 1990 * examples 18,19 * ---	1-12	A61K7/00
X,D	FELIX AM ET AL: "Pegylated peptides. IV. Enhanced biological activity of site-directed pegylated GRF analogs." INT J PEPT PROTEIN RES, SEP-OCT 1995, 46 (3-4) P253-64, DENMARK, XP002064559 * page 261 - page 263; figure 3 * ---	1-12	
X	EP 0 473 084 A (SUMITOMO PHARMA) 4 March 1992 * claims 5,8,9,11; example 13 * ---	1-12	
Y,D	CAMPBELL RM ET AL: "Pegylated peptides. V. Carboxy-terminal PEGylated analogs of growth hormone-releasing factor (GRF) display enhanced duration of biological activity in vivo." J PEPT RES, JUN 1997, 49 (6) P527-37, DENMARK, XP000657594 * page 527, column 2 * * page 530 * ---	1-12	TECHNICAL FIELDS SEARCHED (Int.Cl.6) A61K
Y	ZALIPSKY S: "CHEMISTRY OF POLYETHYLENE GLYCOL CONJUGATES WITH BIOLOGICALLY ACTIVE MOLECULES" ADVANCED DRUG DELIVERY REVIEWS, vol. 16, no. 2/03, 1995, pages 157-182, XP002037428 * page 159 - page 161; figures 1,2 * * page 166, column 2 - page 168, column 1 * --- -/--	1-12	

~~The present search report has been drawn up for all claims~~

Place of search	Date of completion of the search	Examiner
THE HAGUE	14 May 1998	Gonzalez Ramon, N

CATEGORY OF CITED DOCUMENTS

X : particularly relevant if taken alone
Y : particularly relevant if combined with another document of the same category
A : technological background
O : non-written disclosure
P : intermediate document

T : theory or principle underlying the invention
E : earlier patent document, but published on, or after the filing date
D : document cited in the application
L : document cited for other reasons

& : member of the same patent family, corresponding document

EPO FORM 1503 03.82 (P04C01)

European Patent Office

EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT

Application Number
EP 97 12 1264

DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category	Citation of document with indication, where appropriate, of relevant passages	Relevant to claim	CLASSIFICATION OF THE APPLICATION (Int.Cl.6)
Y	WO 97 17367 A (THERATECHNOLOGIES INC) 15 May 1997 * page 4, line 28 - page 5, line 10; figure 1 *	1-12	
A	* tables 2,3 *	1-12	
A	ZHANG C. ET AL: "Radioimmunoassay of growth hormone-releasing hormone (GHRH) with a polyclonal antibody against synthetic GHRH(1-29)-Gly4-Cys-NH2: Method and clinical studies" CLIN. CHIM. ACTA, 1991, 202/3 (243-254), NETHERLANDS, XP002064562 * abstract * * page 245, paragraph 1 *	1-12	

TECHNICAL FIELDS SEARCHED (Int.Cl.6)

~~The present search report has been drawn up for all claims~~

Place of search	Date of completion of the search	Examiner
THE HAGUE	14 May 1998	Gonzalez Ramon, N

CATEGORY OF CITED DOCUMENTS

X : particularly relevant if taken alone
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D : document cited in the application
L : document cited for other reasons

& : member of the same patent family, corresponding document

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European Patent Office

Application Number
EP 97 12 1264

CLAIMS INCURRING FEES

The present European patent application comprised at the time of filing more than ten claims.

☐ Only part of the claims have been paid within the prescribed time limit. The present European search report has been drawn up for the first ten claims and for those claims for which claims fees have been paid, namely claim(s):

☐ No claims fees have been paid within the prescribed time limit. The present European search report has been drawn up for the first ten claims.

LACK OF UNITY OF INVENTION

The Search Division considers that the present European patent application does not comply with the requirements of unity of invention and relates to several inventions or groups of inventions, namely:

see sheet B

☐ All further search fees have been paid within the fixed time limit. The present European search report has been drawn up for all claims.

☐ Only part of the further search fees have been paid within the fixed time limit. The present European search report has been drawn up for those parts of the European patent application which relate to the inventions in respect of which search fees have been paid, namely claims:

☒ None of the further search fees have been paid within the fixed time limit. The present European search report has been drawn up for those parts of the European patent application which relate to the invention first mentioned in the claims, namely claims:

1-12

European Patent Office

LACK OF UNITY OF INVENTION
SHEET B

Application Number
EP 97 12 1264

The Search Division considers that the present European patent application does not comply with the requirements of unity of invention and relates to several inventions or groups of inventions, namely:

1. Claims: 1-12

   Preparation of hGRF-PEG conjugates containing PEG covalently bound to Lys12 and/or Lys21 and/or terminal NH2 in solution and followed by chromatographic purification

2. Claims: 13,14

   Intermediates for the pegylation reaction leading to hGRF-PEG conjugates with PEG covalently bound to Lys12 and/or Lys21 and/or terminal NH2.

3. Claims: 15,16

   A cell based reporter gene assay system for screaning of the GRF activity

4. Claims: 17-20

   Use of hGRF-PEG conjugates as a medicament for therapy and diagnosis of growth hormone related disorders

ANNEX TO THE EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT ON EUROPEAN PATENT APPLICATION NO. EP 97 12 1264

This annex lists the patent family members relating to the patent documents cited in the above-mentioned European search report. The members are as contained in the European Patent Office EDP file on
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14-05-1998

Patent document cited in search report	Publication date	Patent family member(s)	Publication date
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		DE 69026306 D	09-05-96
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		GR 3019991 T	31-08-96
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		JP 3072469 A	27-03-91
EP 0473084 A	04-03-92	JP 4108827 A	09-04-92
		AT 130327 T	15-12-95
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		DE 69114614 D	21-12-95
		DE 69114614 T	28-03-96
		DK 473084 T	04-03-96
		ES 2079534 T	16-01-96
		GR 3018612 T	30-04-96
		US 5183660 A	02-02-93
WO 9717367 A	15-05-97	AU 7273196 A	29-05-97

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For more details about this annex : see Official Journal of the European Patent Office, No. 12/82